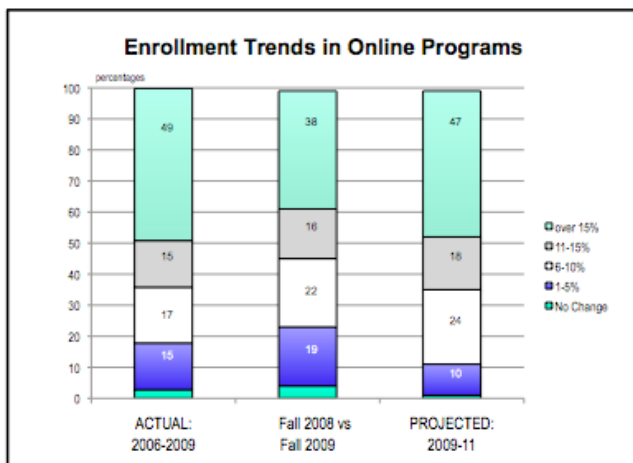


Online Education Programs Marked by Rising Enrollments, Unsure Profits, Organizational Transitions, Higher Fees, and Tech Training for Faculty

Enrollments are up and rising, profits are often uncertain, and organizational arrangements are in transition according to a new national survey of senior campus officials responsible for managing online and distance education programs conducted by WCET (wcet.info) and The Campus Computing Project (campuscomputing.net). Additionally, the new survey data suggest that students enrolled in online programs may pay higher fees than their on-campus counterparts, that many campuses have mandatory training on their faculty before sending them “into the web” to teach online courses, and that quality still looms as a large question for online education programs.

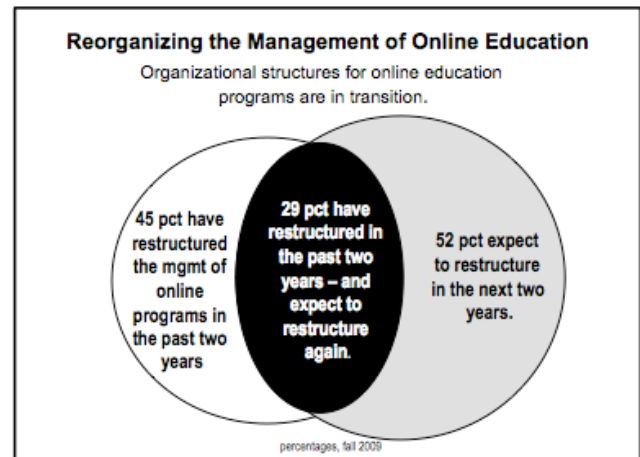
Three questionnaire items about enrollments indicate that campuses participating in the survey have experienced healthy gains in good economic times and bad – and that campus officials expect enrollments in their online programs to continue to rise in the coming years. Fully 94 percent of the survey respondents – typically the senior campus officer responsible for online or distance education programs – report enrollment gains in their online programs between 2006 and 2009; almost half (48 percent) report online enrollments rose by 15 percent or more during this period. Similarly, asked about past year numbers (fall 2008 vs. fall 2009), 95 percent report rising enrollment in their online programs; almost two-fifths (38 percent) report a one-year gain in online enrollments of 15 percent or better. Finally, when asked to project enrollments in their online programs over the next three years (2009-2011), 98 percent of the institutions participating in the survey affirm enrollment gains: almost half (47 percent) expect online enrollments grow by 15 percent or more over the next three years.



The survey data suggest that campuses across all sectors are struggling to deal with the organization of their online programs. Almost half (45 percent) report that they have reorganized the management of their online programs in the past two years, while more than half (52 percent) anticipate that their online education programs will be reorganized in

the next two years. Additionally, almost a third (29 percent) have experienced the reorganization on their online programs in the past two years and also expect another reorganization in the next 24 months.

“The enrollment data, coupled with the new information about organizational transitions in online education programs, document the official ‘arrival’ of online education,” says Kenneth C. Green, founding director of The Campus Computing Project and director of the study. “These data confirm that campuses confront new operational and managerial challenges as online education moves from the periphery to become a much larger and more significant component of the instructional portfolio for many institutions.”

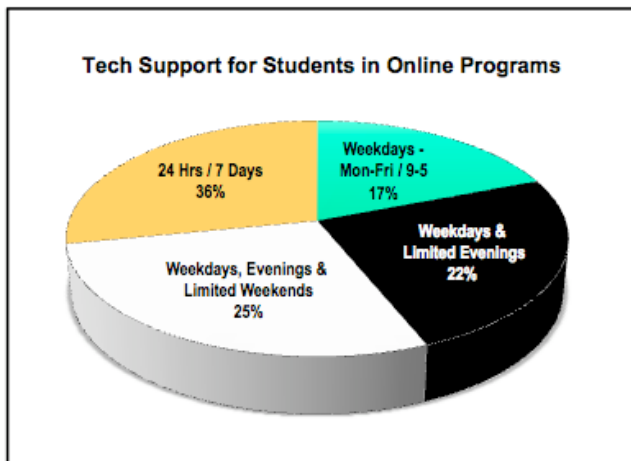


The survey data raise some interesting questions about the profitability of online education programs. Just 1.6 percent of the campuses participating in the survey report that their institution lost money on online programs and courses in the fiscal year that ended in June 2009: 7 percent report that the online program broke even, while 45 percent claim institutional profits on their online initiatives; more than a fourth – 27 percent – report profits were greater than 15 percent. These numbers appear to provide good news for campuses that view online and distance education as an important new source of enrollments and revenue. However, almost half (45 percent) of the campuses participating in the survey checked “unknown” when asked if their program made or lost money. The “unknown” responses ranged from 26 percent in private master’s institutions to 63 percent in community colleges.

“Although institutions know that the rising enrollments in their online programs are generating revenues, they just don’t know if these programs are really making money. Many campuses have a very hard time with the kind of cost accounting required to assess real profits from online education,” says Green.

The survey provides new data about the student costs of online education. A third (31 percent) of the campuses indicate that tuition is the same for online and on-campus students. Interestingly, a fifth (20 percent) report that tuition is lower for students in online programs. Yet at almost half the surveyed institutions, tuition for online students is often higher than for on-campus students: in some instances students in online programs may confront tuition charges that are 10 percent or more than the tuition paid by students in parallel on-campus programs.

In addition to the possibility of higher tuition, students in online programs may also incur additional fees not imposed upon their on-campus counterparts. For example, almost a fifth (19 percent) of campuses participating in the survey impose a one-time registration fee that averages \$232 (range: an average of \$51 in public master's colleges to \$1316 in private universities). Admittedly, these one-time fees may be limited to special programs, but they are charges not imposed on students in the on-campus program. Other fees that may await online students include special charges for individual courses (27 percent), course materials (18 percent), or technology resources and services (24 percent).



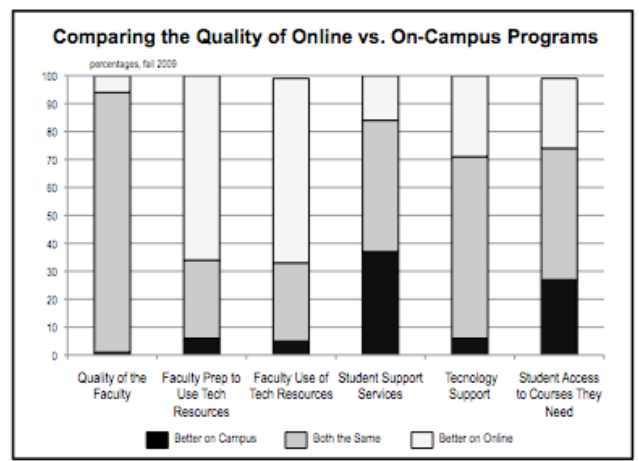
The survey data confirm that many campuses invest in preparing their faculty to teach in online programs. Fully half (53 percent) have mandatory training requirements for faculty who teach in online programs; the mandatory training averages about 27.5 hours.

Technical support is a major issue for students enrolled in online programs: the survey data suggest a range of campus strategies in providing technical support for students. For example, one-sixth (16 percent) of the campuses participating in the survey limit tech support to campus workdays (e.g., "Monday-Friday, 9-5"). A fifth (22 percent) provide tech support for students during campus workdays and during some limited evening hours, while a fourth (25 percent) offer support services on workdays with limited evening and weekend hours. Finally more than a third (35 percent of campuses in the survey) report "24/7" tech support services for students.

"Tech support really is a key component of the infrastructure for online programs. Done poorly, it has the potential to be the 'Potemkin Village' of online education," says Green. He cites a winter 2009 survey of community college presidents conducted by The Campus Computing Project and the League for Innovation that revealed two-year colleges were hiring part-time faculty to respond to the rising enrollments fueled by the economic downturn. But, says Green, "these same institutions were not hiring academic advisors, career counselors, or tech support personnel to

assist the growing numbers of students. It's a hollow promise when campuses add courses without the concurrent commitment to provide appropriate tech support services for students and faculty."

Despite the reliance on the Internet and the Web, the survey data provide ample evidence that online courses depend heavily on traditional print materials. More than four-fifths (85 percent) of the survey respondents report that traditional textbooks are "widely used" in their institution's online education courses and programs. And although large numbers of campuses report the wide use of online text resources (74 percent) and asynchronous text-based discussion (76 percent) in distance education classes, other electronic and web-based technologies are such as asynchronous video discussions, eBooks, online whiteboards, wikis, and web conferencing are not widely deployed in online courses and programs.



Quality looms as an important issue for online education. Almost all respondents affirm that faculty quality is comparable in their online and on-campus programs (93 percent), while four-fifths (79 percent) assert that the student learning experience is similar, student outcomes are the same (84 percent), as is employer acceptance of the credentials of students from online and on-campus programs (93 percent). Additionally, large numbers of the respondents report that tech support is about the same in the on-campus and online programs (65 percent), as are course completion rates (60 percent) and student retention/degree completion (54 percent). Yet there is not much evidence from this survey or other sources that campuses are engaged in an intensive examination of their online programs: respondents at half (48 percent) of the campuses participating in the survey indicate that student assessment in online programs resides primarily with faculty, while primary responsibility for program evaluation resides within individual departments (49 percent of campuses).

The 2009 Managing Online Education Survey is a collaborative initiative of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET) and The Campus Computing Project. The survey data are based on responses from 182 senior campus officials at two- and four-year public and private US colleges and universities who were surveyed in September and October 2009. Survey respondents were typically the senior campus official responsible for the management of online and distance education programs at their institutions. The survey report will be available from The Campus Computing Project (campuscomputing.net) on November 20th.